

Reaffirming Our Commitment to Improving Health Services for Hispanics

By Clay E. Simpson, Jr., MSPH, PhD
Closing the Gap, Hispanic Agenda for Action • October 1998

Demographers tell us to expect dramatic changes in the composition of the U.S. population. By the year 2009, we should expect Hispanics to become the largest minority group in the country. This projection poses many challenges to our nation's health policymakers.

I have been personally touched by efforts to secure the well being of the Latino population. For instance, last summer, a Hispanic senior medical school student showed up at my office and reminded me that when he was a high school junior, he participated in the Hispanic Youth Initiative in Health, Biomedical Research, and Policy Development Summer program, coordinated by the InterAmerican College of Physicians and Surgeons. What's so amazing about his visit is that he still remembered the presentation I made many years ago as part of the Youth Initiative, and thanked me for my words of encouragement. The Youth Initiative is one of several efforts supported by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) that has proven to be effective in stimulating Hispanics to pursue careers in fields where they are still under represented—the health and biomedical sciences.

HHS has made progress in addressing the needs of the Hispanic population, particularly since the launching of the Hispanic Agenda for Action (HAA) in 1996. Nevertheless, the 1997 HAA Progress Report reflects the need to improve several areas in order for us to reach the traditionally underserved Hispanic community.

We reaffirm our commitment to improving services to Hispanics, and recognize that without action we won't be able to accomplish our goals. In order to solve the manifold obstacles in the delivery of quality health care to Hispanics, HHS agencies are following what I call an A.C.T.I.O.N. plan responsive to the needs and expectations of Hispanics. A.C.T.I.O.N. stands for: Addressing health issues, Challenging gaps, Transforming attitudes, Involving Hispanics in the decision-making process, Optimizing information resources, and Networking with community-based organizations.

We're addressing health issues that touch the lives of millions of Hispanic Americans. For example, in 1997 the Health Care Financing Administration conducted a series of seminars on Medicare and Medicaid issues that affect Hispanics. We're also challenging gaps in the provision of health care and services to Hispanics. In order to

further the departmental goal of eliminating health disparities that affect the Hispanic population, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration will award grants to the U.S./Mexico border states to provide prevention and early intervention activities on substance abuse to Latino youth and families.

Furthermore, we're transforming the attitudes of health care policymakers toward the special needs of the Hispanic community. By helping managers and staff reach an increased awareness of Hispanic health issues, our Department will be able to make wise decisions that will benefit the Latino community.

We're aware of the severe underrepresentation of Hispanics in the HHS workforce and recognize that further efforts are imperative to diversify our work environment. Many agencies are striving to recruit and involve more Hispanics in the decision-making process because of their special knowledge of the health needs of the Latino community.

We have, however, been successful in capitalizing on our information resources to disseminate culturally and linguistically appropriate materials to Latinos via the Internet, toll-free numbers, and mail. HHS also provides valuable health information through television, radio, and newspapers.

Finally, HHS, by means of cooperative agreements and contracts, is consistently networking with community-based organizations. Hispanic organizations, both local and national, tend to have a deeper insight into the health issues that affect the communities they serve and represent.

HHS' strong commitment to A.C.T.I.O.N. is helping us make significant strides in furthering the goals highlighted in the Hispanic Agenda for Action. Nevertheless, each and every one of us must continue channeling our efforts to improve services to Hispanic customers. But awareness of health disparities that affect Hispanics is not enough. Only A.C.T.I.O.N. can respond to the health needs of our rapidly growing Hispanic population and bring us closer to equality in the delivery of health care.

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